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ABSTRACT

The progress of students enrolled in the writing center of a midwestern university was evaluted after one semester. Subjects were 35 students who had taken the first semester of a two-semester composition course and had failed to meet the guidelines for correctness established for the course. After writing a pretest essay, students were tutored once a week for a semester, with a limited number of punctuation and grammatical principles taught through sentence combining. Two other instruments were part of the evaluation: a 50-item objective test to examine grasp of spelling, punctuation, and grammar principles; and sentence combining exercises; both were given at the beginning and end of the semester. At the end of the semester the students completed a posttest essay. Comparison of the pretest and posttest essays revealed that the students' writing improved in quality, but contained decidedly shorter clauses and T-units. However, the raters did not identify their writing as simplistic--the use of more adverbial dependent clauses and more compound sentences produced writing that no longer interfered with a reader's progress. The paragraphs of the sentence combining exercise were too difficult for the students to manipulate comfortably, and even the posttest paragraphs contained more syntactic weaknesses than did their pretest essays. The subjects' gain of 2.09 on the objective test was significant but it was still 2.6 points below the initial score of a control group of students in a regular section. (Examples of student essays are included.) (HTH)

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Evaluating Students' Achievement in a Writing Center

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After a semester in our Writing Center at Iowa State University, our students reduced errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling by more than one half and improved the quality of their writing enough to enable them to pass the second semester of freshman English. In our Writing Center program we tutor students just once a week, offering them a limited number of punctuation and grammatical principles taught through sentence combining. When we analyzed pre- and post-essays at the end of the semester, we found that our students' writing improved in quality but contained decidedly shorter clauses and T-units. In this paper we will describe the program, explain the procedures for the evaluation, and present the results.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

Students in our Writing Center have taken the first semester of a two-semester composition series, and failing to meet the guidelines for correctness that are established for the course, they have received "incompletes," which they must erase by work in the Center. Our department attempts to establish uniformity in grading across the 300 sections of the two freshman courses, English 104 and 105, that run each year. To this end, the course presents students a manual which outlines objectives and describes standards of material, organization, style, and correctness for compositions they will write. Errors designated "serious" and counted against their grade include run-on sentences, fragments, faulty agreement, shifts in construction or dangling modifiers, inconsistent tense,

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punctuation leading to misreading, apostrophe omissions, and misspellings. Although many of the students we see are weak in the larger areas of composition, we must concentrate on sentence structure and mechanics in order to help them meet this standard in the little time we have to work. Teaching a limited number of rules of punctuation through sentence combining allows us to correct common errors they are making and offer sentence varieties that they can use and feel secure in handling.

Our program schedules students in half-hour private tutorials or hour-long small group sessions meeting once a week. Tutors present a principle, and students practice creating the structure through sentence-combining exercises. The course is cumulative, beginning with a lesson on subject-verb recognition and proceeding to sessions on coordination, subordination, and relative clauses. We also teach apostrophe use and help students to design efficient proofreading strategies.

Six tutors make up the staff, all with classroom teaching experience. Three are full-time staff members, and three are graduate students. We have designed our exercises using sentences which discuss campus activities, local places, and current events in order to keep students' interest. We stress sentence variety and introduce students to transitional terms, but the kernel sentences we offer do not encourage the use of free modifiers, nor do tutors urge students to lengthen or shorten their sentences.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY

For this evaluation we included 35 students enrolled in the Writing Center spring semester of 1982 whose problems were not due primarily to dialect or second language interference. Although we have foreign and

minority students working in the Center, we tailor the instruction to their needs, often working primarily on verb tenses and forms. For this study we wanted to test our recently completed sentence structure program, and tutors presented these exercises and assigned uniform paper topics to all students. Nine of the study's students who had scored below eighth grade on the Stanford Achievement Test of Spelling were given extra instruction in spelling, which required two additional hours a week.

In 1981, after completing the teaching materials, we had run a pilot study to evaluate instruments for the research. Essay topics were taken from those used by Andrea Lunsford at Ohio State.[1] The pre-essay asked students to describe their worst teacher; the post-essay asked them to describe their best teacher. In analyzing the results we found that errors decreased by one half, but we decided that the topics were too easy and not typical of the papers students would have to write in English 105. Consequently, we changed the topics for the 1982 study. This time we chose for the pre-essay the topic "Should colleges have the right to ban controversial speakers from the campus?" For the post-essay students wrote on the topic, "How do your perceptions of parents, school, friends, hobbies (choose one) differ now from those in your childhood?" Students had half an hour to write each essay and used no dictionary.

In writing these essays students were aware that their performance would not influence their grade. We explained that the purpose of the pre-essay was diagnostic and the purpose of the post-essay was to gauge their progress. Students knew that a test of their success in the program would be a longer composition they would write at the end of the semester.

Therefore, motivation was similar in both essay writing settings.

Two raters read each essay. Each student was assigned a code number to facilitate the transfer of the data to the computer; therefore, names were removed from the essays before they were rated. Raters were instructed to read the papers placing them in one of three categories: 1) capable of work in English 105, 2) needing a semester of Writing Center instruction, 3) probably needing more than one semester of Writing Center work. Each category was given two levels, allowing a six-point scale for a finer discrimination of ratings. Since we had previously used this scale in placing students into Writing Center programs, raters were accustomed to working with it.

Two more instruments were part of the evaluation. One was a 50-item objective test we have designed, which examines spelling, punctuation, and grammar principles we teach. The other was pre- and post-sentence combining exercises consisting of paragraphs that we have decombined.[2] Students were given 20 minutes to rewrite the paragraphs.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Essays. The pre-essay revealed that most of our students' writing is marred by multitudes of errors in spelling and punctuation, and these errors interfere drastically with the readability of their work. Writing an average of 237 words, students produced a mean of ten errors in their essays. Spelling made up half of the errors; the others appearing most frequently were run-on's, fragments, apostrophes, commas between closely related parts (often subject and verb), and shifted constructions. When students wrote long sentences, they seemed to lose track of the beginnings

and frequently produced what Mina Shaughnessy called "blurred patterns": "In many people's mind they feel controversial speakers can sway the college students ideas of what he or she feel is right." More frequent than using short, choppy sentences was the tendency to write long, awkward constructions: "When considering whether or not to ban controversial speakers, many questions arise such as, "What about freedom of speech?" and "What reactions of effects does controversial speakers at a college have on the students there?" Even less ambitious sentences were often repetitious and riddled with error: "College is a place to learn and controversy is something new that every one should get a taste of, banning a controversial speakers would, in a way get in the way of learning."

Only four of the students wrote short sentences. In general, as Shaughnessy noted, remedial students are not immature writers. They attempt most of the constructions of more skilled writers and use a variety of sentence openers, not relying on continuous subject-verb patterns. But the weaknesses lie in their inability to manipulate words and grammatical structures. While some of the flaws are syntactic lapses, many are redundancies and wordy phrases caused by students' inability to find words and word forms that could smooth out their sentences. As additional distractions to a reader, the spelling and punctuation errors not only interrupt the flow of the work, but inevitably reflect on the credibility of the writer.

The post-essays showed a remarkable drop in the number of errors.

Table 1

Pre- and Post-Essay Scores, Error Counts, and Word Counts with Significance Probabilities

	pre-essay	post-essay
Essay score	3.42[1]	2.96* [1]
Number of errors	10.2	4.1**
Number of words	237.74	230.69 NS

[1](1=high 6=low)

*significant at better than .05

**significant at better than .01

NS not significant

Table 1 indicates that students wrote approximately the same number of words on the post-essay but reduced their errors by more than half. Grammar and punctuation errors dropped by half, and spelling errors dropped somewhat more. In addition, the quality of the essays improved. Improvement occurred in students of all abilities with one third moving out of the level designated as "needing remedial help." A check on 18 students who have completed English 105 shows that only one received below a C grade. That student dropped out of the course. The teacher indicated his work had been satisfactory but he had found the course difficult.

Table 2

Clause, T-unit, and Sentence Length on Pre- and Post-Essays with Significance Probabilities

	pre-essay	post-essay
words/clause	9.7	7.63**
words/T-units	15.86	12.06**
words/sentence	18.84	15.01**
ratio clause/T-units	1.34	1.34 NS
ratio T-units/sentence	1.19	1.27 NS

n=35

**significant at better than .01

NS not significant

Table 2 verifies what was evident from reading the pre-essays. Students were writing long sentences and clauses that they were unable to control. Clause and T-unit length on pre-essays were longer than most studies report for students in regular freshman classes. Checking on one section of English 105 students, we found that their first in-class expository papers produced shorter sentences and clauses than remedial students' papers,with T-units of 14.77, clauses of 9.49, and a mean sentence length of 17.5. Two studies of freshman writers show similar figures for pre-essays. The Morenberg, Daiker, Kerek study at Miami University gives clause length of 8.75 and T-unit length of 15.31 for their experimental

group.[3] Richard Haswell's study at Washington State gives clause length as 9.26 and T-units as 14.94.[4]

As expected, after instruction in sentence combining, students in the Morenberg and Haswell studies increased clause and T-unit length. On the other hand, our students showed a substantial drop in length. Comparison with Hunt's scale indicates that in the post-essay their T-unit length is comparable to just above the eighth grade level, and clause length is just below eighth grade figures.[5]

A close analysis shows what changes have occurred. Students are writing substantially more clauses, but shorter ones. Our program teaches them to write and punctuate adverbial clauses and relative clauses as well as to punctuate compound sentences. Adverbial clauses increased substantially (from a mean of 3.9 to 5.6). Students frequently chose adverbial clauses as sentence openers. In addition, the ratio of T-unit to sentence increased slightly. Students were using more compound sentences. Conjunctive adverbs are easily remembered, and students compounded sentences using semicolons with some ease. At the same time the ratio of clause to T-unit remained the same. While noun clauses remained approximately the same, adjective clauses beginning with wh (who, which, where) dropped from 1.23 to 1.14, which was not a statistically significant change. However, this drop occurred in the pilot study. Evidently students find the somewhat shifting rules for punctuating relative clauses difficult, and they are reluctant to use them. In short, students have learned what they have been taught and have used what they felt they could handle. The two-word drop in clause length and almost four-word drop in T-unit are

exceedingly high. We attribute the pronounced decrease, in part, to the essay topics. Research has shown that syntax required of argument produces longer T-units than other rhetorical modes, and the topic on controversial speakers may have lead students into somewhat longer structures. The pilot study using topics of worst and best teachers resulted in a drop of one half word in clause length and two words in T-unit length. The two counts taken two years in succession, all showing reduced clause and T-unit length, are sound evidence of this trend.

Sentence-combining exercises. The second measure we took of T-unit length was on sentence combining exercises. Studies have shown that students' T-units are shorter in sentence combining exercises than in free writing, and our students produced T-units of about 12 on pre- and post-tests. However, our conclusions were that the paragraphs were too difficult for the students to comfortably manipulate. Even the post-test paragraphs contained more syntactic weaknesses than students' initial free writing. Both paragraphs required that students organize material into lists and maintain parallel structure, and students were unable to find word forms that produced smooth results. For instance, a student wrote: "Three factors are used to determine if a person is brain dead they are: 1) no reflexes recorded from the person, 2) no breathing without the aid of a respirator, and 3) is that the potential donor is sending out no brain waves." On the other hand, students from nine regular classes used as a control group had little trouble handling these structures. Many of them organized the list into parallel sentences: "1) a brain-dead person has no reflexes, 2) a brain dead person has no brain waves, 3) a brain dead person is unable to breathe without the mechanical help of a

respirator." Better papers contained more concise lists: "The hospital used 3 factors to determine brain death. They are as follows: 1) no reflexes, 2) no brain waves, and 3) inability to breathe with mechanical help from a respirator." These students wrote significantly longer T-units on these exercises (14 words) and composed better sentences than Writing Center students, who produced some of their worst work.

Objective test. Finally, our students showed a gain of 2.59 on the 50-item objective test. Although this gain was statistically significant, their final score was 2.6 points below the initial score of students in regular sections. The lower score on tests of usage is borne out in a comparison of ACT English scores. Our students showed a mean of 15.9 compared to a mean of 21.6 for students in regular 105 classes.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

E. D. Hirsch stresses readability as the major determinant of good writing. Shorter clauses lead to greater readability because they place less of a burden on the reader's short-term memory. Furthermore, he writes that "the main uncertainties of bad writing are small-scale, local uncertainties persisting from word to word, sentence to sentence."[6] It is just these obstructions in students' work that inevitably lead them to be sent to our Writing Center for an extra semester of intensive training. A questionnaire we have used for three years was adapted from one designed by Andrea Lunsford at Ohio State[7] and revealed information about these students similar to what Lunsford found. Three quarters of them have had composition courses in high school and been instructed in grammar and punctuation. One half have received an average grade of B in their high school English courses and do not come to us with a long history of

failure. The errors are not as frequent or serious as the basic writing students of Mina Shaughnessy's program. But somehow our students have not acquired a facility to manipulate vocabulary or sentence structure in smooth or fluent ways. The result is wordy phrases and awkward constructions, especially pronounced when they deal with less familiar material. After a semester's instruction in basic sentence structure, these students, using more adverbial dependent clauses and more compound sentences, produce writing that does not continuously interfere with a reader's progress. Although the clause and T-unit length is shortened, raters do not identify the writing as simplistic as shown by the generally higher ratings awarded their papers. Indeed, research by Faigley has shown that these measures account for as little as four percent of the quality of compositions recognized by readers.[8]

Two sets of pre- and post-essays may illustrate the kind of improvement that takes place. In the pre-essay, the following writer repeats an awkward opening participial phrase throughout the paper. Furthermore, redundancies, awkward expressions, and an abundance of wordy participial phrases interrupt the reader's progress. The post-essay shows improvement of these weaknesses. While it is not a polished essay, a teacher can mark the paper giving specific corrections and suggestions for improvement in content; whereas the first essay's problems are so overwhelming, the teacher scarcely knows where to begin.

Pre-Essay

When considering whether or not to ban controversial speckers, many questions arise such as, "What about freedom of speech?" And "what reactions or effects does controversial speakers at a college have on the students there?"

When considering the first question concerning freedom of speech I would have to agree that controversial speakers should be allowed because it is written in our constitution that anyone has the freedom of speech to say whatever they want.

In dealing with the second question concerning the reaction of the students and the effect it can have on them. I feel that by the college level most students are able to control themselves and whether they would agree with the speaker or not, most students can control their reactions. So if riots or outbursts were a concern, I think that there isn't to much to worry about. When considering the effect of such speakers on the students I think it could be for the better. First of all, why should these speakers be ban from a college environment when they arn't ban from a "real world" environment. Secondly, controversial speakers cause students to think and make their own descions on matters as to whether they agree with the speaker or not and if not, what their own opinion is.

In summary I feel a college should not have the right to ban controversial speakers because to ban them takes away from the students learning and growing that happens outside of the classroom at the college level.

Post-Essay

When I was younger I use to view my parents as a nuisance. Especially when I was in Middle school. At that point in my life I felt I didn't need them forever telling me what I could and couldn't do. I didn't have much appreciation for them because no matter what I wanted to do, it seemed as though they always disagreed. At that time my parents seemed like a nuisance, an extra burden I could do with out. I felt as though they guided me so closely in my descisions that I had no freedom of choice. It was their way or no way at all.

Now when I look back at the advice and guidance they gave me, I'm glad I had parents like them. What they had learned through experiences they related to me. And although I didn't always feel then that their opionons were right, I know now that they were.

Now I appreciate my parents more than ever before. I pay more attention to what they have to say because I have faith in their advice. Now I can easily say that I wouldn't trade my parents for the world.

The second examples come from one of our best writers. The syntax of the pre-essay is sound. If the student had divided sentences and deleted words, the essay would read smoothly. Many of the mechanical errors seem to be carelessness. The post-essay illustrates the writer's ability to use a variety of sentence patterns, but this time sentence length is controlled and used for rhythm and emphasis.

Pre-Essay

Since the early years of our forfathers, American citizens have exercised their rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of speech. Which has carried down through the years and aided Americans in their fight for better educations and more input into our governmental decisions. Keeping a clear open mind on controversial issues is difficult so it is impairative that colleges and other organizations not ban controvesial issues from being discussed.

Todays college students will be tommarrows leaders, so they must try and grasp as much knowledge as they can while their young, so that they will make more educated desicions in the course of their life. If controversial subjects are not looked at from all angles students will have a tougher time making decisions and sticking by them. College is a place to grow and learn; therefore, it is the duty of the administration to hit upon as many subjects as they can and provide different points of view.

Our Constitution provides us with rights to hear and speech on controversial issues, but it is our duty to learn as much as we can about every topic, so that we as americans can make the right decision and lead of country down the right path. Where better to start than a college, a place to form opions and carry them out into the real world?

"Iowa a place to grow." This motto should not only apply to Iowa but to the thousands of Colleges and University across the United States. It should read "College a place to grow."

Post-Essay

Throughout life my views on parents, friends, schoolwork and sports have changed. As a youngster I perceived life much differently than I do now. While growing up my goals and ideals have changed, thus changing the way I view the major people and things in my life.

When I was young, I felt that the most important people in my life were my parents. Most of the time they were my best friends, supplying me with love, laughter, and happiness. But there were times when we didn't always see eye to eye on certain subjects. Our relationship was very important to me because it supplied me with a sense of security which enabled me to go out and tackle the world with confidence.

Now that I am older and away from home, I see my parents in a different light. I am very grateful to have such loving and attentive parents but I am glad to be away from home and on my own. The support they gave me when I was young has enabled me to achieve my goals and meet problems head on. Now I want to break away and do things on my own. My parents are still the most important people to me but I find that schoolwork, friends, my boyfriends rank very high on my scale.

As my parents and I grow older I find myself looking back trying to preserve what we shared. I realize now that we have not lost our closeness, it has just taken a different form. I like to call it mutual respect.

It would seem from this study that our students need to move back a level, to practice simpler routines until they gain control of techniques that will allow them to move on once again.

Notes

[1] Figures on remedial students' essays and sentence combining exercises are given in Andrea Abernethy Lunsford, "An Historical, Descriptive, and Evaluative Study of Remedial English in American Colleges and Universities," Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1977.

[2] Paragraphs were taken from "A Definition of Irreversible Coma: Report of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Harvard Medical School to Examine the Definition of Brain Death," The Journal of the American Medical Association, 205 (5 August, 1968), p. 337.

[3] See Max Morenberg, Donald Daiker, Andrew Kerek, "Sentence Combining at the College Level: An Experimental Study," Research in the Teaching of English, 12 (October, 1978), pp. 245-256.

[4] See Richard H. Haswell, "Within-Group Distribution of Syntactic Gain Through Practice in Sentence-Combining," Research in the Teaching of English, 15 (February, 1981), pp. 87-96.

[5] Kellogg W. Hunt, Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels (Champaign, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1965).

[6] E. D. Hirsch, The Philosophy of Composition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977) p. 105.

[7] See Lunsford, pp. 154-159.

[8] Lester Faigley, "The Influence of Generative Rhetoric on the Syntactic Maturity and Writing Effectiveness of College Freshmen," Research in the Teaching of English, 13 (October, 1979), pp. 197-206.